“I’m Not Billy Elliot”: Billy Evans and the Politics of Morris Dancing.

In pubs and parties, 23-year-old Billy Evans is using the socialist legacy of the “Red Vicar” to prove that English traditions don’t have to be a playground for the far-right.

The garden air was thick with smoke and lukewarm beer. People drifted, loosely forming groups, some talking, most pretending to listen. It was, almost certainly, recognisable as a typical student house party.

Then the rhythm changed.

Not from a DJ, or someone ambitiously hijacking the Bluetooth speaker, but from a jingle of bells and the tune of a folk song.

A group emerged from the house, wearing white trousers and straw hats, bells strapped around their calves. Some clutching wooden sticks, others waving white handkerchiefs.

Almost magically, the party was completely subdued. No one dared to say a thing, all that could be heard was the clinking of bells and the sudden hit of a stick. The group exploded into dance, prancing back and forth – moving in complete unison.

The subdued fell into chaos - most looked confused, albeit entertained. People pulled out their phones: cheering, shouting and spilling drinks. It felt like an anachronistic fusion, a folk riot in a back garden party.

Through the blur of white and amongst the cacophony of bells is Billy Evans. For the uninitiated who merely saw him dancing, he may appear as just a jingling jester. But

meet him later and the Morris regalia has been swapped for a casual t-shirt and jeans. He's a product of rural Essex and he'd been holding a Morris stick since as long as he can remember.

"I can send you a picture, actually," he says with a laugh, "of me as a baby holding a massive Morris stick."

Don't mistake this for some silly coming-of-age story though, "I'm not Billy Elliot!" he jokes after I ask him if dancing was ever a form of escape. "I'm not Morris dancing the pain away, that's ridiculous." For Billy it was something simpler: something to share, something to laugh at.

"It was something to do, really,' he tells me. "There wasn't much in the countryside. The youth club was full of drugs. I didn't really enjoy football. This was just… fun."

Whilst it wasn't some planned rebellion, it also connected Billy to a history much more subversive than the average rural pub-goer may believe.

Billy's Morris side, the Thaxted Morris Men, weren't created to preserve the ways of twee, isolationist English villages. It was founded in 1912 by Conrad Noel, famously dubbed the 'Red Vicar'. Noel was a devout Christian socialist who flew the red flag of socialism alongside the St George's cross. He believed folk culture could connect people to one another through a sense of nationhood – not rooted in the British state but in the shared culture of ordinary people.

In the 1920s Thaxted became a flashpoint for an unusual struggle, known as 'The Battle of the Flags'. Noel's refusal to remove the socialist and Sinn Fein flags led to outraged Cambridge students raiding the church, attempting to remove the flags themselves. For Billy, stepping out in the bells isn't a recreation of history, it's a continuation of that political friction.

“I’ve said in interviews before, it’s not a living history organisation,” Billy says, his tone more serious. “We’re not reenacting the past. We are very much situated in the present. Folklore is what people do, it’s current and its present and we are doing it earnestly.”

“Morris dancing in its current state has existed in one way or another for thousands of years,” he continues. “I think Conrad Noel definitely had an idea of it being rooted in socialism and the people.”

For Billy, the point isn’t nostalgia, instead it’s a continuation. The history is important to him because it shows Morris was shaped by people who saw folk culture as a form of community politics. His dancing is the modern-day version of that: an act that insists tradition is lived rather than ignored. “It’s a way I show my love for this country”, he says. “It’s genuine traditions without it being in a horrible racist neo-patriotism way.”

Given how often tradition is used as a political weapon, it’s easy to see why the story of the Thaxted Morris Men feels so surprising.

"I’m very proud to be English, but in the most progressive, un-racist way possible," he explains. In Billy’s room, we sit beneath a large St George’s cross on the wall, a flag that can often have troubling connotations in 2026. "I want to reclaim English identity as one that is accepting and kind and community based. The England I love has nothing to do with Empire; it’s the England of Zadie Smith, of diversity, of having a laugh."

For Billy, maintaining that difference hasn’t always been easy. He becomes particularly animated when discussing how “bored media outlets” may sometimes take a shot at Morris dancing to push this outdated image. “There have been some really bad times,” he admits. “People have taken some really good photos of me and the Thaxted Morris men side and used them to celebrate something like the Queen’s coronation.”

The irony is not lost on him. “If any of them actually spoke to us, they’d realise it’s a very phoney view to have of the tradition.” he argues, leaning forward in his chair slightly, “we’re all really left-wing sort of people.”

“The very same people who are complaining about British culture being diminished haven’t got a clue,” he continues. “They’ve never made any attempt to be involved in the culture. They’ve never gone to a folk session or even learned a tune. To them, British culture is just racial slurs from a 1970s comedian. That’s not culture. Our culture is rich and full of stories and music.”

“When they see Morris dancers they’ll titter and call us weirdos, but we are doing a much better job preserving English culture by not being racist.”

On the topic of racism, you can’t talk about Morris without also addressing some misconceptions of the performance in 2026. Specifically, the use of blackface in Border Morris traditions. Billy performs Cotswold Morris, with traditional handkerchiefs and sticks, but the community can often be painted with the same brush, especially by the media.

“It’s completely unacceptable,’ he says flatly. “It’s been outlawed by all three major Morris organisations - if any sides do it, they are immediately banned. Occasionally people will take a swing at it, which I find disheartening really – it’s already quite a marginalised bastion of British culture. I just wish people would see it’s not weird, hateful old men. It’s quite vibrant with lots of young people involved.”

Despite some people’s views on the tradition, Morris is a spectacle at core and Bristol, a city known for its rebellious streak, is the perfect stage. Billy describes the Morris 18-30s, a massive pub crawl where each person dons the Morris outfit and dances in every pub.

“We were outside the crown at 3 AM dancing with melodeon music and everything, and people were just loving it,” he grins. “They were, like, getting involved and everyone was partying and dancing with us, and it was really great. it was a fantastic moment.”

It’s these moments – the 3AM jigs or London Tubes where people either gleefully join in or have “socially conditioned themselves” to not look - where the tradition feels most alive.

“When there's 6 Morris dancers doing jigs and playing music loudly on the tube, we’re doing it to get you to look at us,” he says on the London transport etiquette. “Watching people sort of try and not look whilst also really wanting to look is always quite a funny thing.”

To Billy, the lack of seriousness is the point. It’s a complete refusal to appear ‘cool’, a daunting idea for most people in their twenties.

"You can't dress in white trousers and a straw hat and wear bells and not laugh at yourself," he says, leaning back. "Because it's a ridiculous thing to do. It’s really fun, but… you know, I think if you’re a Morris dancer and you're going out into the city expecting people to take you seriously, then you're going to have a problem. It’s fundamentally a silly thing to do."

This self-awareness is what allows him to navigate the complexities of a 21st century English identity. Folklore is current, not based in the past. It’s not something to be dusted off for bigotry or coronations - it’s a living, breathing, and sometimes jingling reminder of what connects us.

“It’s about making people happy I think, really,” he contemplates. “We’re just happy to be the clowns at the end of the day.”